

**‘Marwa Na Dena’/ ‘Don’t Get Us Killed’:
Reporting Between the Marginal and the Military in Pakistan**

Background note for workshop readers:

I conducted dissertation fieldwork in Karachi and Islamabad between 2014-2016. During this period, there were 45 independent news channels operating in Pakistan, and my analysis here will focus on the responses of broadcast journalists employed by three specific media groups – GEO, Dawn and Express – all of which had launched English news channels in the mid-2000s that were short lived, (GEO English shut down in 2008, Dawn English had to switch language formats in 2010, and Express 24/7 ended in 2011). Originally hired for their elite English language skills, these broadcast journalists turned to Urdu-only news channels in order to remain working in the television news industry. My access to these interlocutors was no doubt facilitated by my own employment at GEO English prior to graduate school in addition to cross referencing a particular social-professional network in Karachi that privileges Western-educated Pakistanis with cultural and social capital on their return. I was invited into media organizations to observe news production at work, I sat in during professional training seminars, and I would interact with my interlocutors at social events as well. All names used in this paper have been changed to protect identities.

Introduction

The bustling news studio had grown eerily quiet after the 9pm news bulletin had aired; someone had kindly turned down the blaring volume on the wall of TV screens to a low rumble, and the night shift staff was slowly trickling in. I had just put away my notebook for the day when Hashim (pseudonym) snapped his fingers and swiveled around in his chair to exclaim, “Now that’s a good example!”. Hashim was the head of the news desk at Dawn News, he was a veteran journalist who also hosted a late night political talk show. We had earlier been discussing the differences between print media and television news, more commonly referred to in Pakistan as the ‘electronic media’ and he began to describe the following incident:

Hashim: “Once, our reporter managed to obtain the testimony of one of the wives of Osama Bin Laden, after he was killed. This reporter begged me to run the story on the air but I thought to myself – all the other channels will shamelessly copy the report. So instead, we wrote up the story and printed it in the Dawn newspaper and the next day all the international media picked it up, New York Times, BBC, everyone was quoting us! It was great!”

Me: “But wasn’t this kind of story the perfect fit for a ‘breaking news’ report on television?”

Hashim shook his head in disagreement, “See, there are some stories that you can’t claim exclusivity once it goes electronic – in fact, there are times when you don’t even want to be the only one reporting! For example, remember when the government finally accepted that Ajmal Kasab (one of the militants in the 2008 Mumbai bombing) was a Pakistani citizen? We broke that story on TV and I immediately got a call from GEO’s news director asking me ‘*Yaar*, is it true? Tell me honestly, *aur marwa na dena!* (Don’t get me killed!) I said, ‘Sir, you know me, you were once my boss, I’m telling you in confidence, the source is the Army Chief himself’ – he quickly thanked me and didn’t even wait to end the phone call, I could hear him as he yelled to his staff ‘*oye, chala doh! Chala doh!*’ (quick, run the story!)” Hashim laughed as he recalled that moment and said, “These are rare instances, but we do help our rivals out in such situations”.

Over the course of my research in Karachi, it was clear that Pakistani news media professionals were well attuned to which kinds of news stories they could pursue, produce, and successfully circulate on the variety of media platforms now available to them. Eighteen years after the deregulation of the mass media, private news channels have established themselves as powerful players on the political spectrum, drawing both awe and disdain for their blistering critiques of politicians combined with their race for ratings. Despite their insistence on the “independent” nature of the electronic media (in contrast to the state’s prior monopoly on television), broadcast journalists are highly attentive to the ways in which their work remains bounded in general by the state and in particular, the deep state. Limited critical scholarship on the Pakistani military establishment has documented its penetration into virtually every sphere of public life, including the bureaucracy and the media,

showing how through its allies, with both direct and indirect decision making, the military effectively dominates Pakistani society (Siddiqa 2007, Rizvi 2000, Shah 2014, Haqqani 2005). It comes as little surprise then, that Hashim shared the source of his breaking news story with a rival news channel given the particularly sensitive nature of the story – while social relations amongst journalists certainly weigh in to such scenarios, there is more than journalistic fraternity at play in this moment. Pakistani news channels are notorious for airing news without verifying sources and are certainly not unique in blurring facts in exchange for sensational headlines. A number of recent scandals have revealed the corrupt relationships between media group owners and their top anchors with political parties and influential businessmen, peddling their agendas through competing channels¹. It is these very relationships that enable media groups to thwart the state's efforts to reign in sensationalist broadcasting. Indeed, the consequences for misreporting on issues pertaining to the 'civilian' government, oftentimes in the form of slander and false quotes are brushed aside with ineffective defamation and libel laws – the state continues to issue monetary fines and legal notices to news channels that pile up in dusty office corners, effectively rendering the government's electronic media monitoring unit as a toothless watchdog.² On the other hand, the risks of misreporting on issues concerning the Pakistani military (or in certain cases, actual reporting at all) carry a much graver threat. If we follow Hashim's reasoning, it was far safer to have multiple news channels reporting the same sensitive story, rather than claim exclusivity and become the targeted focus of any fallback.

In this paper, I analyze the logics of self-censorship against the shadow of the deep state, as practiced by news media professionals featured in my dissertation fieldwork in Karachi and

¹ Dubbed 'Mediagate' in 2012, this episode led to allegations of bribery practices against celebrity news anchors and received widespread condemnation within the media industry. (Lodhy, 2012)

² There is a separate discussion section on the politics of the state media monitoring unit (Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority – PEMRA) elsewhere in the dissertation, I have removed it in this workshop paper due to constraints of space.

Islamabad. The term ‘logics’ denotes how words and concepts make sense in specific contexts; their intelligibility comes from the ways in which language and institutions are embedded in a social world of iterative actions and performative practices. Following Lisa Wedeen’s (2008) work on the performative politics of words and deeds, I focus on the shifts in tone, the anxious laughter and the lengthy pauses that verbose journalists adopted when they would perform an inarticulate critique of the military. Such enactments rest upon the very real dangers of straying past the limits of investigative inquiry in Pakistan, particularly when presented with the fate of their colleagues pursuing critical leads on military activities, extremist militant groups, and cases of religious sensitivity. By paying attention to these performative practices, I will draw upon my interviews with Pakistani news media professionals to illustrate how the liberalized space provided to a deregulated media industry in current-day Pakistan turns on its compliance in maintaining a particular state narrative.

A report by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) released in 2016 placed Pakistan fourth on the list of the deadliest countries in the world for journalists, with 115 journalists killed in the past 25 years. While much of the international scholarly focus on Pakistan post 9/11 has been interested in issues of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism (Iqtidar 2011, Haqqani 2005, Toor 2011) little attention has been paid to the journalists risking their lives, and often times paying for it, for the very stories that draw the attention of these expert analyses. The disappearances of journalists working on such issues and the body dumps that follow serve to threaten the journalist community into practicing strict forms of self-censorship when reporting on sensitive topics, commonly referred to as ‘red lines’. These lines are drawn around issues that cannot be frequently reported on, and if such stories were to make appearances, the most exposure they would receive would be in a couple of English language newspapers. Prominent examples of red lines include: the

treatment of peasants at the Okara military farms, any negative coverage on socio-political conditions in Balochistan, the conditions in FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas), now Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa³, or the topic of missing persons, all of which receive little to no coverage in the mainstream Urdu media. Even when English dailies do publish critical opinion pieces on some of these issues, the actual reportage, which is the crux of journalism, is missing (Siddiqa, *The Friday Times*, Oct 2017). As Taimur, one of my interlocutors explained in late 2016:

“The red lines have always been there and they kind of become established and we kind of know, okay we can do this (story), we can’t do this one. And then, they’ll go and change the red lines. So then, Sabeen gets killed. That changes the red line. They attack Hamid. That changes the red line. Saleem Shazad gets killed. That changes the red line. And now, with this controversy they have against Cyril, it’s pretty crazy...”

While I will later return to engage in a full discussion of each of the high-profile cases mentioned in Tamiur’s quote above, for now it is important to note that these incidents represented critical shifts of the expansion or deepening of the boundary lines that demarcate the journalistic spatial map of high-stakes reporting in Pakistan⁴. During my transcription of the above audio excerpt, I found myself wanting to italicize ‘they’ in the quotes above for emphasis, but I have chosen not to do so, precisely because Tamiur did not alter his tone when using this pronoun. I began searching through my audio recordings, noting where the shift in tone would take place among certain interlocutors,

³ Since Pakistan's creation in 1947, the Northern tribal areas - a rugged, impoverished swath bordering Afghanistan - have been ruled directly by Islamabad under a harsh colonial-era system of law, with omnipotent political agents exercising the right to impose collective punishments on tribes and to jail suspects without trial. In 2018, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) were merged into the country's administrative mainstream, becoming part of the northern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK).

⁴ Due to limitations of space, this workshop paper will only include the Hamid Mir case as an example.

and where it wouldn't. I found that it was during conversations where I would have to ask the inevitable follow-up question to confirm my assumption – ‘who are *they*?’ It was here, at this point where the responses from my interlocutors were accompanied by physical shifts in posture, audible changes in tone along with requests to go ‘off the record’ largely depending on the context of the topic being discussed. The answers to my pointed question (‘who are they?’) would produce a variety of terms – “the powers that be”, “the deep state”, “the status quo powers”, “the establishment”, but most commonly, a curt, matter-of-fact tone reserved for “the military” and “the military intelligence” would come about. The contextual circumstances of this practiced-hesitation were evident: here I was, a researcher with the privilege of returning to the US on the next flight out, asking my interlocutors to go on-record with the root reasons for self-censoring practices in their professional lives as media practitioners. Despite my assurances of anonymity, and the added safety clause (in this case) that academic research takes years to publish, my interlocutors were understandably wary. That the Pakistani military has not and does not tolerate published criticism of its institution is no secret. Indeed, the clarity of that intolerance is historically documented by both stringent censorship laws that the Pakistani press has borne throughout multiple military regimes and the brutal consequences suffered by journalists who have attempted to evade them (Niazi 1986). It is thus against a backdrop of over forty years of state censorship that the emergence of Pakistani liberalized mass media in 2002 becomes extremely significant. Noticeable within both national and international journalistic commentary, political experts and analysts are prone to mention the rise of electronic media as an important change contributing to Pakistan's social milieu. Most of this media talk illustrates the watchdog-status that some commentators attribute to private television channels, explicitly noting their contribution to supporting civilian-led democracy and positioning their emergence as a progressive force in society. With the development of rights-based discourses that include the freedom of information, how does the history of state censorship inform and shape the

ways in which Pakistani media professionals negotiate their day-to-day work as they redraw the implicit and explicit boundaries of producing public discourse?

The Open Secret: Naming the Unnameable

While I have previously analyzed the transformative changes that privatized television news channels have wrought upon the Pakistani political landscape (Mulla 2017), in this paper I am choosing to focus on the ways in which very little has changed journalistically, when it concerns reporting on the military. To be clear, the military establishment is the most powerful institution in the country, but it is not the only threatening force that curtails investigative journalism – the police, militant groups, political parties and criminal networks, have all targeted journalists who choose to dig deeper in their reportage. Yet, unlike the latter groups, it is precisely the overt influence of the military and its associated agencies that pressures journalists to practice self-censorship as an implicit but open ‘secret’. For my interlocutors, the acknowledgment of this open-secret during their interview was accompanied by physical changes in posture, audible alterations in speech and a cued understanding that we were now discussing a particularly delicate topic. If the influential power of the military is well-defined for the average Pakistani citizen, then the open-secret of not reporting on specific military-related stories is all the more ingrained in Pakistani journalists. Jodi Dean (2002) has argued that it is the public recognition of state secrecy that enables a democracy to manage the split between what political life is supposed to be and what it is seen to be, between its ideal type and its lived experience. She argues that “recognition of state secrecy – and the accompanying conspiratorial subtext to everyday life that it engenders – functions today to block political participation and curtail the possibility of truly democratic endeavors. Specifically, collective assumptions about the secret state (its capacities, interests, omnipotence) installs an ever ready alibi

for failed or stalled politics in the public sphere, allowing the fantasy of democracy to coexist within its distorted reality.”⁵ Where there have been courageous attempts to rupture the balanced management of that secret, swift consequences have followed. A number of factors play into the boldness of openly stating the military’s role in curtailing investigative journalism in Pakistan, and even journalists who have obtained high positions in their professional hierarchies and socioeconomic class are not immune to the risks involved. Let us consider the following case:

On April 19, 2014, one of Pakistan’s most famous television journalists, Hamid Mir, was on his way to broadcast a talk show in Karachi when he was shot at six times by unidentified gunmen. Miraculously alive, Mir was rushed to the hospital for surgery, and his employer network, GEO News, reacted instinctively, allowing Mir’s brother to read a statement on camera. This statement publicly accused Zaheerul Islam, the then-director of the military spy agency, of attempting to assassinate Mir to put an end to the lead anchor’s increasingly vocal opposition to certain military operations. In response, competing news channels surprisingly launched a multitude of conspiracy theories against Mir and his employers at GEO, some going so far as to claim the attack was an orchestrated publicity stunt by the network itself. Advertisers dropped the news channel immediately, plunging the channel into financial loss. One month later, the GEO Network issued a rather verbose public apology in both its Urdu and English newspapers, largely addressing viewers of its television news channel but more specifically the armed forces and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). A condensed version of the notice may be read as the following:

After serious introspection, editorial debates, feedback and engagement with all parties, we have concluded that our coverage immediately after the tragic and unnerving attack on Hamid Mir on April 19th was excessive, distressful and emotional. . . . This has caused deep hurt to ISI as an institution, the rank and file of the Armed Forces and a large number of our viewers. We deeply apologize hurting them all. (“GEO tenders apology to ISI,” 2014, May 26, para. 5)

⁵ Cited in Masco (2014, p. 135)

For viewers who had grown accustomed to watching mostly sensationalist practices of news reporting over the past decade, the objective of this particular apology was well-understood. This statement not only acknowledged the questionable style of broadcast but, more importantly, was an admission of having crossed a line long held to be taboo. Indeed, the apology issued by GEO appeared as the final act in a much longer battle of gradually raised stakes between a civilian government and the military. This dramatic standoff, mediated through a news channel's overt allegations of the ISI's involvement in a targeted attack on their prime-time anchor, is just one example that highlights the unprecedented shifts taking place in the power dynamics of Pakistan's socio-political landscape. GEO was never able to fully recover from the economic backlash it experienced during the immediate aftermath of the Hamid Mir attack, and while the channel is still operational, my interlocutors at GEO were both optimistic about the channel's relevance in the news media industry and understandably cautious. Aatif, a senior executive producer in Current Affairs programming at GEO said in 2016:

“I'm frightened certainly because I've seen what the military – no, not the military, let's say the status-quo powers... , I mean, I think the establishment is made of much more than only the military, so yes, I've seen what the establishment can do, but I've also seen what we can do. I've seen GEO come down from such a high, I mean it was almost finished. They used to say we had to turn the electricity off on certain floors because we were running on two minutes of advertising per hour - they just didn't have the money to pay the bills! And then now here it is again - when I joined in 2014, GEO was ranking about 6 or 7 - today, it's a distant number 1 again. We're still at 60% distribution, we're cut off from cantonment areas - if you go into a cantonment area chances are you either won't get GEO on your local cable, or if you do it's on channel 96!”

As can be gleaned from Aatif's quote above, being quoted on-the-record as talking about the 'establishment' is a much safer term than speaking directly about the military in a negative light. And yet, despite the lack of a direct correlation being articulated between advertisers and their fear of taking sides against the 'establishment' (hence, maintaining their distance from GEO), we can safely

assume this to be the case as we discover that television cable operators dropped the availability of GEO as a prime news channel in cantonment areas. Established during British rule and governed by the Cantonments Act of 1924, cantonment areas are permanent military bases of the Pakistan Army, effectively governed by and under control of the Ministry of Defense. Notably, the demographic character of most independence era cantonments has changed, as they are no longer primarily ‘garrison’ areas, and include significant civilian populations and private businesses⁶. Indeed, residential cantonments can be considered as small-scale examples of how the military quietly operates within public civilian life. In order to contextualize the stakes of journalistic practices of self-censorship regarding the Pakistani military, it is imperative to understand just how pervasive the military has evolved to be in Pakistani society.

The Pakistani Military: A Class of its Own

The military gained prominence in the state apparatus soon after Pakistan’s birth, as a result of the first war with India in 1947-1948. In her study on the penetration of the Pakistani military in the state, society and economy, Ayesha Siddiqa (2007) details the ways in which the military evolved into an independent class that ensured its share in the state and its decision making through creating institutional processes. It is not surprising that her aptly titled book *‘Military Inc.’* (2007) is one of the few literature sources that researchers can access to better understand how the military operates in Pakistan. In laying out an overview of the military’s historical interference in governance, Siddiqa examines the army’s stake in its burgeoning economic empire that resulted from military control of the state for several decades (periods of direct military rule: 1958 – 1971, 1977 – 1988, and 1999 –

⁶ The Cantontments Ordinance 2002. <http://pakistancode.gov.pk/>

2008):

“The GHQ sought legal and constitutional provisions to establish its position in the power equation. The legal framework allowed the armed forces a permanent place in power politics as an equal member that was not dependent on civilian authorities for the protection of its core interests. Under this arrangement, the armed forces no longer remained an instrument of policy but acted as an equal partner in decision making. Furthermore, they could determine the security and internal stability of the state without constantly remaining in the political forefront. The military fraternity had developed sufficient economic stakes to not want a permanent exit from power. These interests, in fact, demanded that the dominant class protect them through legal institutional mechanisms, even at the cost of democratic norms and practices...It is clear that the process of institutionalization, could not have taken place without a commonality of interests with the dominant classes.” (p.83)

Sociologist Hamza Alavi (1972), famously defined Pakistan as an ‘overdeveloped state’, by virtue of the overwhelming influence of its bureaucratic-military complex. According to him, the state plays a central role acting in the interests of three dominant classes: “the landed-feudal class, the indigenous bourgeoisie and the metropolitan bourgeoisie...The military’s stakes are intertwined with those of these three groups, making it imperative for the military and the other groups to protect each other’s interests”⁷. Thus, the military’s relevance for the country’s politics is a result of the symbiotic relationship between military force and political power, especially of the ruling elite. While the Pakistani military’s most popular business ventures are welfare foundations (Pakistani readers will be most familiar with these dominant economic players such as the Fauji Foundation, Army Welfare Trust, Shaheen Foundation and Bahria Foundation), Siddiq (2007) lists additional military businesses as diverse in nature, ranging from smaller-scale ventures such as bakeries, farms, schools and private security firms to corporate enterprises such as commercial banks, insurance companies, radio and television channels, fertilizer, cement and cereal manufacturing plants and insurance businesses.” (p. 18). The success of the military’s economic pursuits is often attributed to its

⁷ Alavi (1982: 172-91)

disciplined character⁸, and its high status and prestige are enduring remnants of the might of the Army during British rule in the subcontinent. The continued maintenance of a professional, efficient and most importantly, loyal, army, was of utmost importance for the military elite in postcolonial Pakistan. The narrative of the military as appearing to reluctantly ‘save’ civilian governments from themselves has been well-entrenched, and the Pakistani military always insists on immediate provocation as the trigger of its coups as Hussain Haqqani (2005), has noted:

“Ayub Khan came to power after a violent scuffle in the East Pakistan legislature; Yahya Khan took over after months of rioting against Ayub Khan; Zia-ul-Haq’s coup was the result of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s inability to compromise with politicians protesting a rigged election and the possibility of civil war; and now the army had deposed Sharif because he was trying their commander and was possibly endangering his life. The army’s ability to swiftly execute a military takeover within hours of a supposed provocation is often attributed to its having contingency for such occasions. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals a pattern of careful prior planning, including disorder in the streets orchestrated with the help of the reliable street power of Islamist political parties.” (Haqqani, 2005: 255)

Indeed, the strategic relationships the military has historically fostered with religious groups is conveniently left out of pro-democracy think-tank commentary when the dictators in question are serving American interests. In a 1999 article titled ‘Pakistan: Democracy Is Not Everything’, Richard N. Haas argued: “The coup that brought Army Chief of Staff Pervez Musharraf to power... should not be condemned out of hand. And it may well bring stability to a country and region where stability is in short supply... the greatest danger is a Pakistan that fails, a Pakistan where the central government loses effective control over much of the country, and in the process becomes a safe haven for terrorists, drug traffickers and zealots.”⁹ That these ‘zealous’ elements were once provided

⁸ After the military take over in October 1999, an ordinance that had previously forbid the sale of government land to other entities because of its high market value was withdrawn, and 240 acres were sold to the Defence Housing Authority (DHA) Karachi for a pittance of Rs.20 a square yard. In response to a journalist’s question on the legality of Corps Commanders running Pakistan’s premier housing project (DHA), General Musharraf retorted, “Why should anyone be jealous if some people made good money because of the exceptional efficiency of the housing society?” (Babar, 2019)

⁹ Cited in Haqqani (2005: 256)

American funding, organizational support and legitimacy at the time of the Cold War and the first Afghan war to act as bulwarks against the rising influence of leftist ideology in third-world countries, is of course omitted once such groups have outlived their usefulness (Iqtidar, 2011).

A Dictator Sets the Media Free

Having seized power in 1999, Musharraf was well aware of his role in the international media in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and he astutely positioned his liberal image towards Western political allies – promoting his ideals of modernity, tolerance, and democracy in *The Washington Post* and in numerous interviews, including an appearance on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*¹⁰. Within Pakistan, Musharraf's secular agenda to reform the country was welcomed by a beleaguered liberal elite, wary of what was seen as the increasing 'Talibanization' of society since the 1990s – a wide ranging term which can be read to include state-led Islamization efforts, a rise in social conservatism and an increase in public displays of piety. Musharraf established his secular credentials with Pakistan's liberal elite and NGO-based civil society activists by inviting many of them into his government; a sharp contrast to the campaign of harassment directed against them by the Nawaz Sharif government, which had been working on passing a Sharia Bill in the national parliament¹¹. Thus, instead of condemning the overthrow of a democratically elected government by a military dictator, most NGO activists openly celebrated it and welcomed the General as a savior. While his liberal reforms were hailed by many civil society activists as progressive (Zaidi, 2008), such approval

¹⁰ September 26, 2006 – Musharraf was on the show to promote his memoirs *In the Line of Fire* (2006), a book in which he revealed that after 9/11, Richard Armitage (Deputy Secretary of State) told him that Pakistan would be 'bombed back to the Stone Age if it failed to help Washington'.

¹¹ Toor, *The State of Islam* (2011) p. 195: "so many NGO representatives joined the [Musharraf] government in one capacity or another as Ministers, advisers and consultants, that it became popularly referred to as the 'NGO government'." According to Toor, liberals were not the only ones to succumb to the charms of the General. Even the National Workers Party, a leftist group of trade unionists joined the military alliance.

exemplifies the liberal elite tendency in postcolonial contexts to favor thinly veiled forms of authoritarianism as long as it is secular in nature—with the military control of Egypt after the revolutionary Arab Spring serving as a prominent regional example (Aziz, 2016). Indeed, in such scenarios, it is important to note, as Sahar Shafqat (2017) has done, that political liberalization is, in fact, distinct from democratization and involves an easing of civil liberties restrictions within the framework of authoritarianism (O’Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Stepan, 1988).

In a joint Q&A session with President George W. Bush in Islamabad in 2006, Musharraf listed several reasons that evidently explained his commitment to democracy – introducing a local government system, empowering women and minorities in the political field, and deregulating the media:

“It may sound odd that I, being a military man, am talking about democracy. But let me assure you... We have liberated the media and the press. If you see this press today sitting around here, and the media, previously there was only one Pakistan television. Today, there are dozens of channels. All these people sitting around are the result of my democratization of Pakistan, opening the Pakistan society of the media – the print media and the electronic media, both. And they’re totally liberated.”¹² [sic]

Musharraf’s envisioned liberal-ization of Pakistan eventually unraveled into a series of political blunders – highlighted and criticized by the many news channels he had so proudly encouraged. The remarkable civil movement that demanded Musharraf’s resignation from power in 2008 lauded the media for maintaining pressure on the military regime – a phase that required an evolving television industry to quickly turn revolutionary. Buoyed by their success as a fourth estate¹³, private Urdu-language news channels sought to capitalize on the aggressive tactics displayed by leading current affairs talk show hosts who routinely antagonized politicians on-air, demanding answers from an inept government on behalf of viewing citizens. Heated arguments amongst talk show guests over

¹² Quoted in Ahmed, *Where the Wild Frontiers Are* (2011), p. 120.

¹³ The reference to the social and political influence of private Pakistani media businesses as the ‘fourth estate’ can be commonly found in English language media sources (Khan 2012)

one crisis to another inevitably involves the use of anti-Indian and anti-American rhetoric, peddled in religious conspiracy theories of ‘foreign hands’ attempting to dismantle the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Drawing both local and international attention for their alarming acquiescence in stoking religious and sectarian conflicts, private news channels and their prime time anchors have been regularly accused of pandering to populist religious sentiments in a range of infamous episodes: from condoning assassinations in blasphemy cases, to providing airtime to anti-state militant organizations, or popularizing anti-government protests.

Uncertainty and its Discontents

Watching such belligerent television news programming, it would be difficult to refute the vibrancy of a ‘free’ and ‘functioning’ media in Pakistan. On the other hand, located in the resigned tone of the news media professionals I interviewed were critical choices that must balance the daily risks of selecting which news stories to highlight, as my interlocutor Aatif explains: “Editorial control in any Pakistani news organization is not so much what you should do, but what you should *not* do. I am rarely told what I should do - but I am often told what not to do. There is a daily rundown, and more often than not, we have to leave stories out on the simple basis of a discussion of the pros and cons of each issue.” A particular example he pointed out reflects, indirectly, the stakes involved:

“I can tell you most recently was the media blackout on David Headley which was such a huge thing. No one was reporting on it. No one. And GEO’s problem is very simple - that GEO is always the first to do this stuff but after the Hamid Mir, ISI, fiasco we had to be extra careful. Even if we do something we have to think twice, because ‘will they be happy?’. Whatever decisions we make, we make them as journalists but also as managers and we have to keep in mind that if we take such a big step that the channel shuts down again, we’re not doing anyone a service.” (Aatif, personal communication, October 2014)

The 2013 sentencing of David Headley made headlines in international newspapers and was heavily covered in Indian news media¹⁴. That Headley is an American citizen who confessed to helping plan the deadly 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, is indeed, an attention-grabbing news story. That he admitted to attending the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) training camps in Pakistan, is a story that Pakistani news channels chose to ignore. The Pakistan military has officially denied any links with LeT, yet it's perilous ambiguity toward jihadi militancy is another 'open-secret', and its history of casting a benign eye on some militant groups, while battling others that attack the state has been documented in academic analysis of terrorism in Pakistan (Toor 2011, Iqtidar 2011, Haqqani 2005). For Aatif and his colleagues, a news story that elicits a negative answer to the question "will they be happy?" essentially carries itself to an archive of unproduceable television content. The same story however, can and often does, translate into English-print news which, due to its limited readership, bears less risk than the inciting power attributed to Urdu television news.

[Note for workshop paper reader: I have removed a section on the changing nature of the affordances generally allowed to English print news in recent years. The case of Cyril Almeida follows these changing guidelines and has been cut here for lack of space]

Unfortunately for investigative journalists in Pakistan, the uncertainty of whether or not they are working within designated zones is part and parcel of their investigation. A helpful insight on the mental stress of such working conditions was captured by my interlocutor Taimur: "Not only is it that you're always walking on eggshells, but you don't always know the tensile strength of the eggshells that you're walking on. So sometimes, they're really weak eggshells and sometimes they're stronger. So that's kind of the problem. One, you're being careful all of the time - I think that is

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/25/us/david-c-headley-gets-35-years-for-mumbai-attack.html>

wired into everybody who works in this field but, the added stress is of knowing that these lines are changing. And they're up to be changed at any time.”

Despite the emergence of private news channels as significant institutional players in emerging democracies, documented practices of self-censorship suggests the need for greater attention to be paid to the contextual nuances that give specific shape to the relationship between mass media and democracy. If we follow Aatif's earlier reasoning on calculating the risks of shutting down a television news channel as 'not doing anyone a service', we arrive at the somewhat deflated conclusion that self-censorship practices thus become necessary to practice the 'business' of journalism, if not the spirit of it. When conversing with news media professionals that were additionally in management positions, I encountered this kind of sentiment frequently - 'live today, to fight another day'. It bears noting that for on-the-ground reporters, those in the front-lines of the ratings battles so ardently fought between channels, this sentiment takes the form of a grave reality particularly in the face of state harassment, militant threats and outright physical attacks. In spite of these setbacks, journalism in Pakistan continues to engender a commitment to ideals of truth-telling and factual reportage, exemplifying the tenacity of those that survive this profession. And what happens to our understanding of a democratic ideal of a free media, when the practitioners of that media are characterized by resignation, despair, cynicism and frustration? Analyzing practices of self-censorship requires us then to not only question what we mean by democracy in an age of deep mediatization but also to consider anew the factors conducive to the cultivation of democratic practices, even in the absence of safeguarding democratic principles.

The Privilege to Protest vs The Privilege to Report:

In 2004, an amendment allowing cross-ownership of media led to the consolidation of powerful media groups. While the first players on the scene were mainly prominent newspaper groups, quickly launching satellite television channels and FM radio stations, a number of business groups with commercial conglomerates moved into the media landscape to further stretch the lucrative scope of television advertising as well as building political capital for themselves. Barring a few rare exceptions, the editors-in-chief of most Pakistani news channels are de-facto also the owners of their individual private media groups – the political agendas of each news channel are thus identifiable by the content that they produce, whether anti-government or pro-establishment, depending, especially during the events of 2014-16, on the particular history of the channel's CEO with the current ruling political party.

On September 1, 2014, transmission services for the government-owned channels Pakistan Television (PTV) and Pakistan Television World had been halted. For a short half hour, Pakistani viewers were left wondering whether yet another military coup was under way. But while the tradition of seizing state broadcasting infrastructure surely reminded citizens of military takeovers, this time it was not the sound of army boots storming the premises. Instead, hundreds of protestors from two political parties, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) had breached the state television headquarters, destroying equipment and vandalizing state property. Army troops eventually did arrive at the premises, but only to clear out the building and restore transmission. This incident was not an isolated act of rioting protestors. It took place amid a much longer drawn-out confrontation between these political parties and the sitting government. The combination of two parties, PTI and PAT, both headed by charismatic leaders and both with distinct grievances with the government, pulled together hundreds of thousands of people to a

common site. Known as *dharna*—a nonviolent mode of protest popularized in colonial and postcolonial India—this kind of political action takes the form of an aggrieved party sitting at the offender’s door until justice is received. For 126 days, the longest record of protest in Pakistan, Imran Khan’s PTI and its supporters culminated their Azadi March (Freedom March) by occupying the Red Zone in Islamabad—a generally secure and sensitive site surrounding the Parliament House in the capital city—demanding an independent inquiry into the rigging allegations of the 2013 elections and ultimately calling for Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s immediate resignation. Although the PAT supporters left the protest site after 67 days, the PTI was adamant in its demands and continued the dharna on its own, drawing larger media scrutiny to what was appearing to be an ineffective bargaining tool.

In an article titled “The Limits of Populism,” Zahid Hussain (2014) noted what many pundits on television screens could not overtly say aloud during the coverage of the dharna protests—that the impetus for Imran Khan’s demand for drastic change (i.e., the forced removal of a sitting prime minister through mass protest) must be either enforced by, or at least receive the approval of, the Pakistani military: “The power matrix does not seem to have changed much despite the party’s rallies drawing larger crowds. The only thing that has changed is that the party has lost its only ally with Qadri deciding to take a break from his quest for revolution. Being a shrewd operator, the cleric left the field after sensing there was no hope of a military intervention to help his cause.” (para. 5)

News media professionals and viewers watching at home were well aware that not only did the military have the ability to put an end to such prolonged protests but it was impossible to imagine the unique affordances allowed to both Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri to occupy highly securitized avenues in the heart of Islamabad without the military’s approval. The limited circulation of English

print publications in Pakistan has so far resulted in a certain amount of flexibility within the margins granted to journalists by the military—consider, for example, the rumors of a military coup that were printed in a leading English news magazine, the *Herald*:

There were rumors in the air . . . there were murmurs of a coup d'état. Other than General Shuja Pasha, the former intelligence officer who is known to be a close friend and supporter of PTI Chairman Imran Khan, the other name that was repeatedly brought up was that of Zaheerul Islam, the director general of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Allegedly, the two were conspiring to create a rift between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif . . . under the presumption that the dharna had the general's backing." ("General [retd] Zaheerul Islam," 2015, para. 1)

This kind of commentary must be understood in the context of Pakistan's volatile political history, which bears testament to the fragile civil-military relationship since the country's inception. The military reign of General Ziaul Haq in the late 1970s is often referenced as the most damaging decade of state repression, where even the term *ensorship* was thoroughly censored, as documented by journalists who endured that regime. When Ziaul Haq imposed martial law on July 5, 1977, the guidelines issued to the press two days later mandated that there would be no criticism of the armed forces, nor could any news story be published that could potentially bring the armed forces into disrepute. Newspapers were restricted by law from printing any news about the armed forces that was unauthorized by the Information Ministry (Niazi, 1993). While the 2002 liberalization of the media and the popularity of private television news channels gave media organizations unprecedented power to critique civilian governments and politicians, the state-manufactured sanctity surrounding military forces remained intact. If English print publications (such as the *Herald*, mentioned above) could get away with so much as hinting at military involvement in government affairs in the post-liberalized era, Urdu news reporters were all too familiar with the fatal consequences of directly criticizing the military or its affiliates.

GEO News: A Marked Media Channel

The mediated confrontation between Geo News and the military preceded Imran Khan’s protests in the capital by merely a few months, and the massive backlash the channel continued to receive on the political spectrum took a very physical form during the PTI dharna protests. During the initial weeks of the 2014 dharna, any viewer tuning in to one of Pakistan’s 40 news channels would have been hard-pressed to find news coverage of anything other than the nonstop studio airtime and on-site field coverage of the Islamabad protests. As one executive producer at Geo News exclaimed to me in disdain: “It was just ridiculous . . . they were dropping news bulletins to cover speeches. Nine p.m. was no longer news bulletin time but nine p.m. was Imran Khan’s nightly speech. For almost one hundred days!” (Qasim, personal communication, January 26, 2015). Prime-time current affairs talk shows were dedicated to nightly recaps of the “container speeches” of the day, and news bulletins were full of live footage from musical rallies with detailed commentary and vox pops of dharna participants. While the constant coverage should not have come as too much of a surprise in a heavily mediatized news industry, the stark contrast between a host of channels showcasing clear bias in favor of the populist protests was evident in the counterbias displayed by an infamous channel, Geo News. Reflecting on this polarity during our interview, one broadcast journalist shook her head in amusement as she recalled switching channels at the time as viewing a different country on two opposing screens: “You had one channel that was already establishing a “Naya Pakistan,” (New Pakistan) and there was another channel [GEO] that had already thrown him [Imran Khan] into jail—it’s insane how farfetched it was!”

Owned by the senior journalist Shakil-ur-Rehman, who inherited the country’s largest circulating Urdu newspaper (*Jang News*) from his father, Geo News emerged on the newly privatized mediascape in 2002 as the brand image of one of the country’s most powerful media houses.

Infamous for introducing a sensationalist news reporting style to a nation that had only known terse and sober news broadcasts from the sole state television network, Geo's first-mover advantage had carried it to the top of television rankings for over a decade. Despite its notoriety for chasing mass audiences and throwing ethical caution to the wind in its quest to dominate the industry, Geo's track record on siding with the democratic process has remained consistent. According to news media professionals I interviewed, Imran Khan's dharna was seen as a national-scale distraction by "serious" news outlets and had all the telltale signs of a military hand behind the scenes to shake up a civilian government that was getting too comfortable in bypassing the army in both domestic and international concerns. "I think it had a lot more to do with the Hamid Mir fiasco, to be honest," recalls an executive producer at GEO:

"Everyone discusses this within the media that this [dharna] wasn't something Imran Khan could do on his own. How did he manage to hold the capital city hostage? Nobody else can do it—you have to have some sort of knowledge that if I'm standing here on top of this container, they can't touch me. And it was true, nobody could touch him. I mean, his supporters rush into PTV, vandalize state property, you've broken stuff, there's footage of this attack, you're supposed to be going to jail for this— why haven't you been caught? Why hasn't anyone taken you to task?" (Ahmed, personal communication, February 8, 2015)

If the 2014 dharna fomented speculation within the media community on the military's implicit support for Imran Khan's political agitations, then the encroaching curbs on media freedoms in the run-up to the 2018 general elections confirmed those suspicions when he was elected as prime minister. These restrictions included limited coverage of opposition leaders and the removal of prime-time slots to prominent journalists who publicly questioned the transparency of the elections. External pressures on media organizations arrived in covert form when printing presses were pressured to stop from publishing certain newspapers, cable operators were asked to cease broadcasting certain channels and big businesses advised against putting up advertisements with

certain media outlets¹⁵. Such strategies of plausible deniability have been steadily building to a ‘new era’ of censorship where unofficial and undocumented rules impact journalists psychologically¹⁶.

Conclusion

A growing set of literature in communication studies has sought to shed light on media transformations in transitioning democracies (Alhassan, 2007; Hughes, 2006; McCargo, 2003; Nyamnjoh, 2005; Waisbord, 2000; Wasserman, 2011; Zhao, 2012), effectively arguing against applying broad brushstrokes of developments in Western modernity as a global rubric. In their call to push “beyond the West,” these scholars insist that prevailing theories of media privatization and commercialization cannot account for the distinctive architecture of media systems in regions as diverse as the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. In the case of Pakistan, privatization of the electronic media resulted in a transformed mediascape, with more than 100 television channels now operating after several decades of state television monopoly. While such rapid expansion appears similar to the staggering growth of the media systems of its regional neighbors, media liberalization in Pakistan should be understood in the context of its emergence, its reactionary phase, and, as I have described in this paper, its constrained relationship with the deep state. Pakistani media professionals have a long history of engaging with self-censorship, particularly during the eras of military rule, when entire pages of newspapers would purposely be left blank to protest the denial of free speech, but self-censorship in the age of private television news cannot be as symbolically circulated.¹⁷ Pressures

¹⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2018-year-media-suppression-rights-abuses-pakistan-181229143544306.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/pakistan-journalists-decry-era-censorship-190813064754381.html>

¹⁷ Hussain, Z. (2019, October 3) From blank pages to blackout. *DAWN*. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1512404/from-blank-pages-to-blackout>

on independent news channels to align with the establishment point of view have been steadily mounting in Pakistan and were most heavily felt by the media community during the run up to the 2018 elections. The situation has worsened in 2019 with news broadcasts being mysteriously blocked, journalists being forced to shut down their social media accounts, opposition leaders being banned from appearing on television, and fake viral campaigns threatening journalists run amok.¹⁸

While it would be certainly possible to pursue a textual or regulatory perspective on censorship in Pakistani television news, I would argue that choosing to focus on this issue ethnographically, allows us to explore news producers' ambiguous attitudes toward practices of self-censorship in a much more complex way. Broadcast journalists are only too familiar with the triggering effects of mass media and the ways in which certain content can provoke public responses. Reading such manipulation or the 'politics of outrage' as enabling conditions of mass political action, particularly against a backdrop of what scholars of South Asian media have termed 'postcolonial publicity' (Rajagopal 2011, Mazzarella 2013, Cody 2015), we must also account for the ways in which such publicity allows the physical bodies of journalists to be subsumed by the very stories they choose to follow. In 2015, Zeenat Shahzadi was working on stories related to victims of 'enforced disappearances' and she became Pakistan's first female 'missing' journalist. In October 2017, much of the news media celebrated her return after two years in captivity, praising security forces for "recovering" her safely. According to official reports, she had been abducted by 'non-state actors and enemy intelligence agencies', further adding that she had been rescued from their clutches. Interestingly an editorial in Dawn News, Pakistan's leading English newspaper could only go so far as to leave their readers with this cautious yet stinging statement, which I will also use as a conclusion to my paper today:

¹⁸ Butler, S. (2019, July 22) Why Pakistan's crackdown on the press is getting worse by the day. The Washington Post. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/07/22/why-pakistans-crackdown-press-is-getting-worse-by-day/>

“The circumstances of Ms. Shahzadi’s disappearance and ‘recovery’, the threats she had received prior to her abduction and the fact there was no ransom demand during her captivity, raise questions that lend themselves to but *one conclusion*. . . . a journalist like this young woman, committed to actually seeking out the truth rather than acting as a passive observer, would be an asset in a civilized society. But then, Pakistan would have had to be a different country.”

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